

Spiritual Formation as Seminary Curriculum: A Personal Perspective

Chet Butterworth

Like any responsible graduate student, I was barreling down the interstate after a hard day of climbing on Tennessee's Cumberland Plateau. It was the day of my Spiritual Formation final exam—a group presentation—and I was hours from school with bloody fingers, smelly feet and a hitchhiker in the back seat. “What are you presenting on anyway?” my friend asked as I pressed the accelerator down further. “It’s kind of like a church curriculum for spiritual formation.” “Spiritual formation? Isn’t that just what the church is supposed to do anyway?”

A lot of truth can come in a sarcastic verbal punch from your belay partner. Spiritual formation, the process of being transformed to the image of Christ, is what churches and seminaries are supposed to do, right? My church and its tradition certainly formed me spiritually as I’m sure yours did too. Growing up I was taught to read my Bible, pray and, of course, sing to God with gratitude in our hearts—all three verses! I’m thankful for that, though I was never particularly good at any of it.

At these institutions I was never taught to read God’s word in a *transformational* way. I could read Scripture, even memorize a hundred verses at a time, without opening myself to being transformed. The same is true with prayer. Outside of congregational praying and singing, I was left wandering in the dark for a deeper spiritual life. My experience probably is not too dissimilar from others who came of age in the Protestant tradition. Especially those traditions firmly rooted in nineteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment rationalism. Spiritual disciplines were met in my community with suspicion. Fixed hour prayer? Sounds a lot like works. Liturgical prayer? *Liturgy* isn’t even in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*. And *lectio divina*? That’s not even English! It makes it a bit ironic that I landed myself in a seminary in Nashville, Tennessee.

Seminary is where seekers go to develop gifts and calling for preparation to their particular ministry to the church. *Spiritual formation* is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others. It would seem that the one could not be without the other. Yet until recent decades, seminaries have met spiritual formation with similar, albeit more pretentious, objections as those named above. It’s too Catholic-y. Too broadly defined. Too “anti-intellectual.”

However, I hope to suggest something different. Yes, spiritual formation is something seminaries *do* but they must do it in a very informative and transformative way—a *liturgical* way. James K. A. Smith rightly argues that if seminaries “are not about Christian formation, there’s really no reason for them to exist” at all.¹ My seminary’s inclusion of *spiritual formation* as part of its curriculum benefitted my faith and life inside and outside of the classroom.

The first days, weeks and semesters of seminary can be a mental whirlpool for the new student. Especially if coming from a state university with a completely unrelated degree. There is a language and

1. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 219.

vocabulary of seminary life that no amount of Religion and Comparative Politics credit hours could prepare me for. A few weeks into the first semester, my state school alma mater's religious history professor, a Yale-trained seminarian and my personal mentor, reminded me that after two semesters you catch on to the lingo and discover that half of what seminarians say is hogwash anyway. You have to decide what kind of scholar you will be: one that relates to people or one that talks over people. Regardless, I met this new world of source criticism and critical interpretation with excitement and wonder.

I cannot speak highly enough for the imperativeness of the academic and critical study of scripture. I was sitting at the proverbial table with Old Testament scholars like Gerhard von Rad, Herman Gunkell, Julius Wellhausen, Martin Noth, Terrence Fretheim and Walter Brueggemann, reading and studying my Bible in ways I never had before. New, exciting ways that deepened and strengthened my faith, gleaning and growing from Leviticus and Numbers. *Leviticus and Numbers!* But read wrongly and carelessly (i.e., *prayerless-ly*) the Bible can be a dangerous book and seminary is an easy place to allow the head to overwhelm the heart, to allow the desire to be informed outweigh the desire and need to be transformed.

In the final chapter of his book *Desiring the Kingdom*, Smith argues that Christian education has been primarily concerned with *information* rather than *formation* for far too long.² If not to prepare seminarians for the intellectual task of deciphering and interpreting scripture, memorizing Hebrew paradigms, preparing and delivering sermons and lessons, writing and defending papers and theses, then what is seminary for? Our theological training is an integral part for our calling but it would all be for naught without our transformation into radical disciples of Jesus Christ.

I went through my first year and a half of seminary with the same tired, sporadic and inadequate prayer life as years prior, until Dr. Halstead's Spiritual Formation class opened my life to a world of possibilities to connect to the Creator through a plethora of spiritual disciplines. The purpose of the class, according to the syllabus, was to "encourage personal growth towards holy living and spiritual maturity." Spiritual disciplines "open us to God," they "put us in a place" where we become aware of God and act in response. Spiritual disciplines give the Holy Spirit "space to brood over our souls," as it were. Through the various spiritual disciplines we "keep company" with Jesus and this is where transformation takes place.³

That phrase, "keeping company with Jesus" has become so fundamental to my faith. I may have been exegeting 2 Samuel 24, interpreting Hosea 11, translating (what felt like) gratuitous portions of the Pentateuch—but I wasn't "keeping company with Jesus." I was longing for something more but I couldn't pray without getting distracted, feeling self-conscious or unworthy, my mind going blank or worse...falling asleep.

Before going any further, I feel it necessary to say that I was raised in a praying home. Every morning before school my father would prepare a hearty, home-cooked breakfast, read a small devotional and one of us would pray us into the day. But my mother, my mother was a *pray-er*. The Catholic Church would refer to her as a *suppliant*. In our neck of the woods, she is a *prayer warrior*. She could and would pray the entire 45-minute drive to school every morning. Sometimes I would stare out the window. Sometimes I'd beat my head against the backseat. On a good day, I'd try to mentally repeat or meditate on the words she said before I would doze off.

And that was all before noon. If my life has lacked a prayer language, it was not for a lack of example and opportunity. No, my life lacked a prayer language, a *liturgy* to articulate itself by, because my mother's prayers—however true, and lovely, and beautiful, and elongated they may be—are not my own. In those early morning prayers, I learned to thank God for blue skies, green trees and sunrises over Lake Jackson but, even in my twenties, I cannot sustain an extemporaneous prayer life like my mother. The desire was there, but the language was not.

Where then could I find the words my heart desires to speak? "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find your souls," says the prophet Jeremiah.⁴ I have found a renewal of prayer in the ancient practice of *praying the hours* or "the very prayer

2. Smith, 219. It should be noted that Smith's focus is the Christian university but is analogous to the Christian seminary as well.

3. Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005), 18–19.

4. Jeremiah 6.16

which Christ himself, together with his body, addresses to the father.”⁵ For thousands of years before Christ, YHWH’s faithful recited daily prayers (Ps 119.164; Dan 6.10). Jesus, John, and Peter repeatedly returned to the temple at the hour of prayer (Acts 3.1, 10.9). The same prayers the psalmist spilled onto paper, the same prayers the Savior sweated in deserts and gardens, the same prayers that sustained the church for centuries before empire and centuries after. I’ve never been the sharpest tool in the shed, but without “Spiritual Formation and Guidance,” or GB5553, I would have never thought to let Scripture’s prayers guide my own.

Praying scripture through breath, fixed hour and liturgical prayer, I can attend to, *keep company with*, God throughout the day. Quickly, I realized how the demands of seminary and life in general had a grip on my life. Hourly prayer demands discipline and intention. In our hyper-individualist culture, praying someone else’s prayers may seem peculiar or unauthentic. But I’m learning, like the prophet Jeremiah, sometimes the words of others are better than my own. Their stories are my stories. Their words are my words. And authenticity is a matter of the heart.

On my nightstand sits a coffee-stained copy of Phyllis Tickle’s *The Divine Hours*. If the Divine Office is my liturgy, then coffee brewed slowly on the stovetop is my sacrament. I frame each day with the *Lauds* (morning prayers) and *Vespers* (evening prayers) and, in the recitation of the psalms, songs and prayers, I realign or *renarrate* my life with that *Story*. Fr. Edward J. Farrell encourages us to “[s]ay the words of ancient prayer, and listen for the prayer of God that rises in your heart.”⁶ I have found this remarkably true in my own experience. Out of the words of others flow the words of my own heart, which I try to make a habit to write down—partly to remind myself that I do have words of my own and partly as my own makeshift liturgy to return to over again. Not only do the hours structure my prayer life, but also life itself is seen through new eyes. The liturgy of the hours centers my life in the rhythm of the church past, present and future. In keeping company with Jesus throughout the day, I sustain my life in Christ and in the world.

Life in the world can be ugly stuff. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus’ only reference to the church is his declaration to Peter that the gates of hell will not prevail against her. The life of the minister is to stand at the gates and to kick them in. When standing at the gates of hell, how does the seminarian sustain oneself? Jesus seems to have rooted and sustained his ministry in the silence and solitude of wilderness.

On the first day of Spiritual Formation class, I was ecstatic to see our syllabus required a 48-hour silent retreat. At the time, I saw it as an opportunity to explore and climb the boulder fields above the wild and scenic Obed River. I think I can safely speak on behalf of most climbers, mountain bikers, fly fishers, kayakers and backpackers that a large part of the lure of backcountry is the absence of competitive words. Maybe that’s why people in touch with their outdoorsy side are, in my opinion, just a little bit saner than the rest of society. But I digress.

The desire of solitude is to leave behind the distraction for unadulterated time alone with God. For Henri Nouwen, silence and solitude were the stuff of purification and transformation.⁷ In our noisy, word-polluted culture where instantaneous information saturation is the normative, silence and solitude create space to listen to God. I live for these simple moments, always have. My mountaintop experiences have indeed happened on mountaintops. But ministry cannot exist in isolation; it drags us, willingly or not, to the gates of hell. The classical disciplines of silence and solitude must be reclaimed if seminarians are to keep company with Jesus in the chaos of life.

In Joshua 3, the Israelites find themselves at the border of their long-awaited promised land. The call of the priests is to go before the people, set foot in the Jordan as it overflows its banks and help the people across. Ministry will take the seminarian to places never gone before. The modern people of God may not be landless in the sense of that covenant community, but we certainly know the reality disconnectedness. How does the pastor sustain herself with her feet in the river at flood time?

5. Robert Benson, *In Constant Prayer* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 41.

6. Benson, 15.

7. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Connecting With God Through Prayer, Wisdom and Silence* (New York: Ballentine, 1981), 22.

The goal of seminary is not simply to translate, evaluate or interpret the river at flood stage, but to be formed in the image of the One who flows through that river. If Christian education is to do this, it must be reconnected to the timeless practices of the church and its formative disciplines. In its truest form, Christian education is nothing short of Christian worship, which is—after all—the end and aim of disciplines like prayer, silence, and solitude and countless others. The inclusion of spiritual formation as part of seminary curriculum will not create pastors and priests who can sustain themselves with one foot planted firmly in the river...but it is a start.

A few weeks ago, I returned to the church I grew up in. It is a church where I don't go parading around what school I attend, but I have fond memories of it nonetheless. In Sunday class, the preacher—a friend and supporter of my academic endeavors—asked me what was my favorite class thus far.

“Deuteronomy. Because I'm an incredibly boring person,” I said only halfway joking. “And Spiritual Formation, because it opened to me a world of relationship and desire previously untapped. It kind of saved my faith.”

CHET BUTTERWORTH IS A MASTER'S CANDIDATE IN OLD TESTAMENT STUDIES AT LIPSCOMB UNIVERSITY IN NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE. HE WELCOMED IN THE NEW YEAR SKIING AND CLIMBING IN COLORADO (CCBUTTERWORTH@MAIL.LIPSCOMB.EDU).

